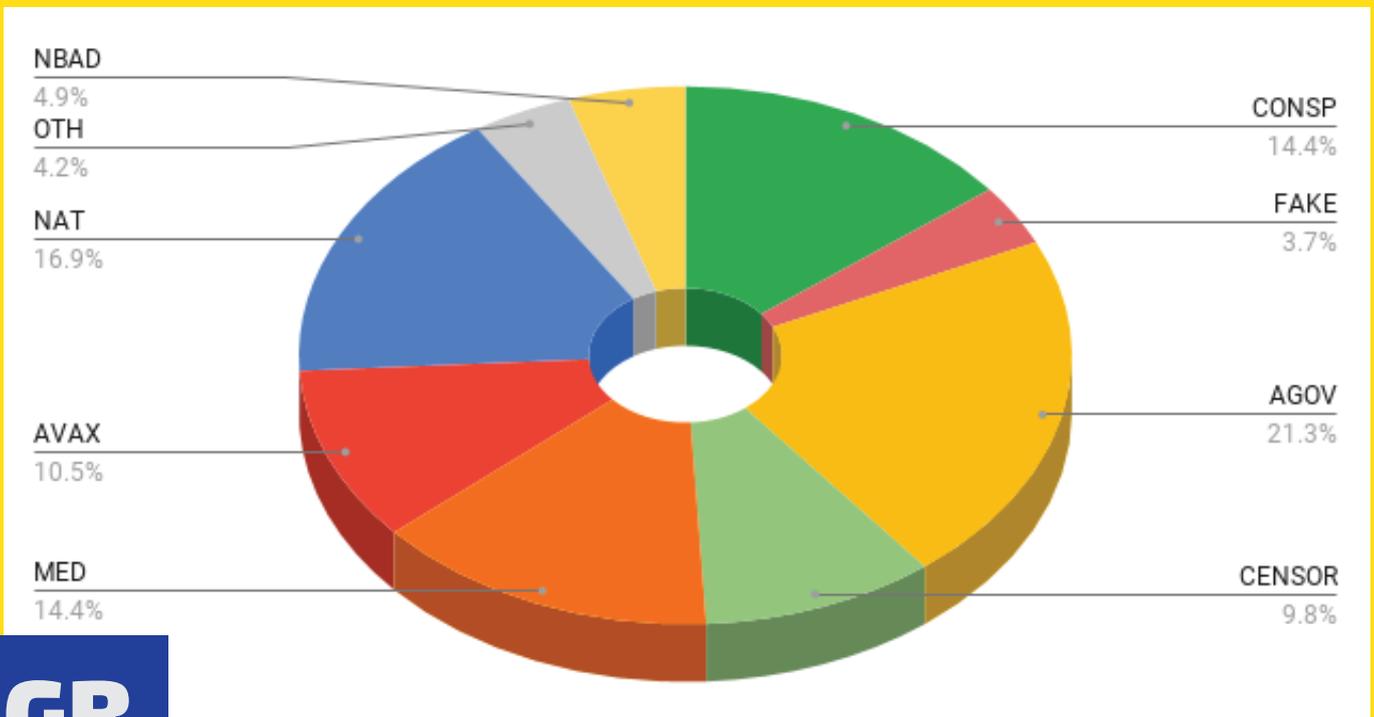
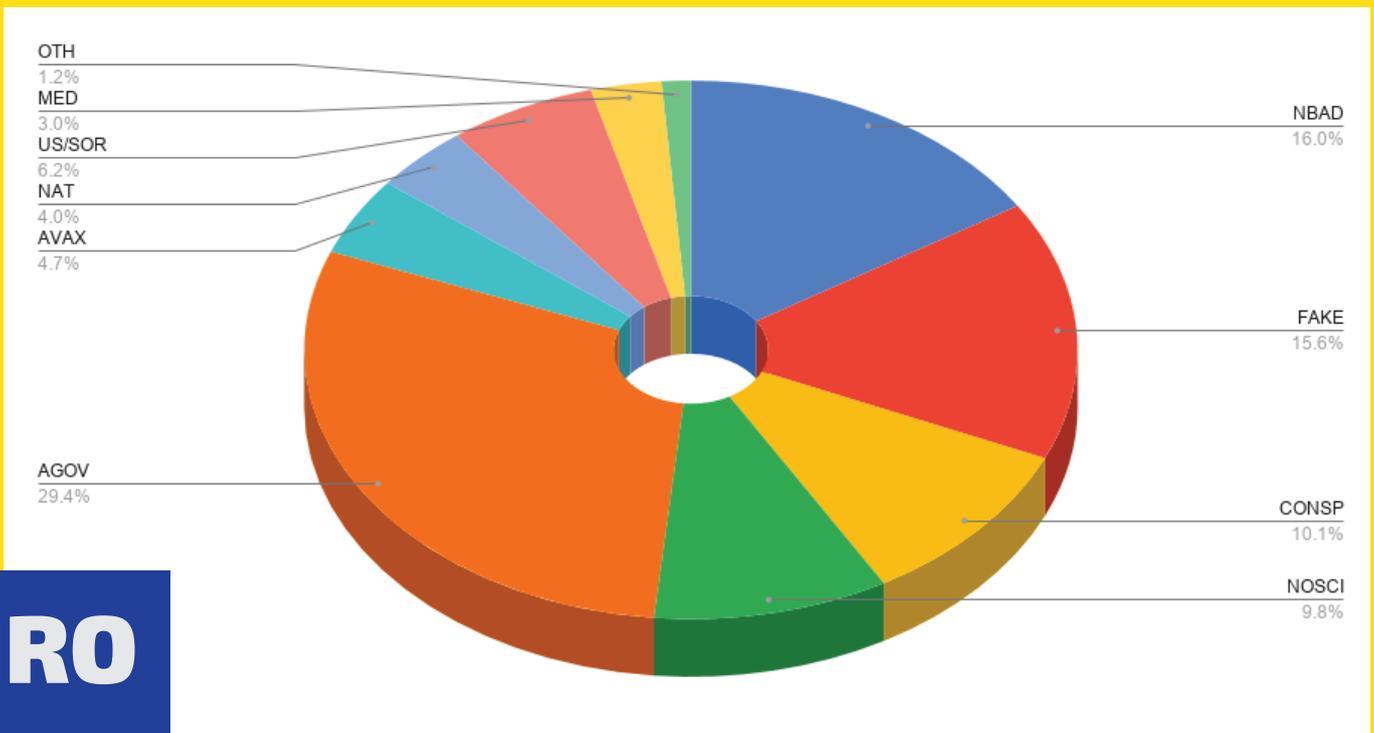


# FAKE NEWS HUNTERS

Second report regarding disinformation in social media in **Romania and Greece** / May 15th - June 20th 2020

## 5G is (almost) out, Bill Gates is down, Soros is up and the Government is under

**assault.** Disinformation becomes more specific and very politically charged. Various individuals and groups are courting each other to build an anti - government, mostly conservative, anti - globalist & anti - western movement. In Greece, disinformation still targets refugees and tries to amplify differences between people of orthodox and muslim faiths.



## Chart legend - main disinformation topics explained

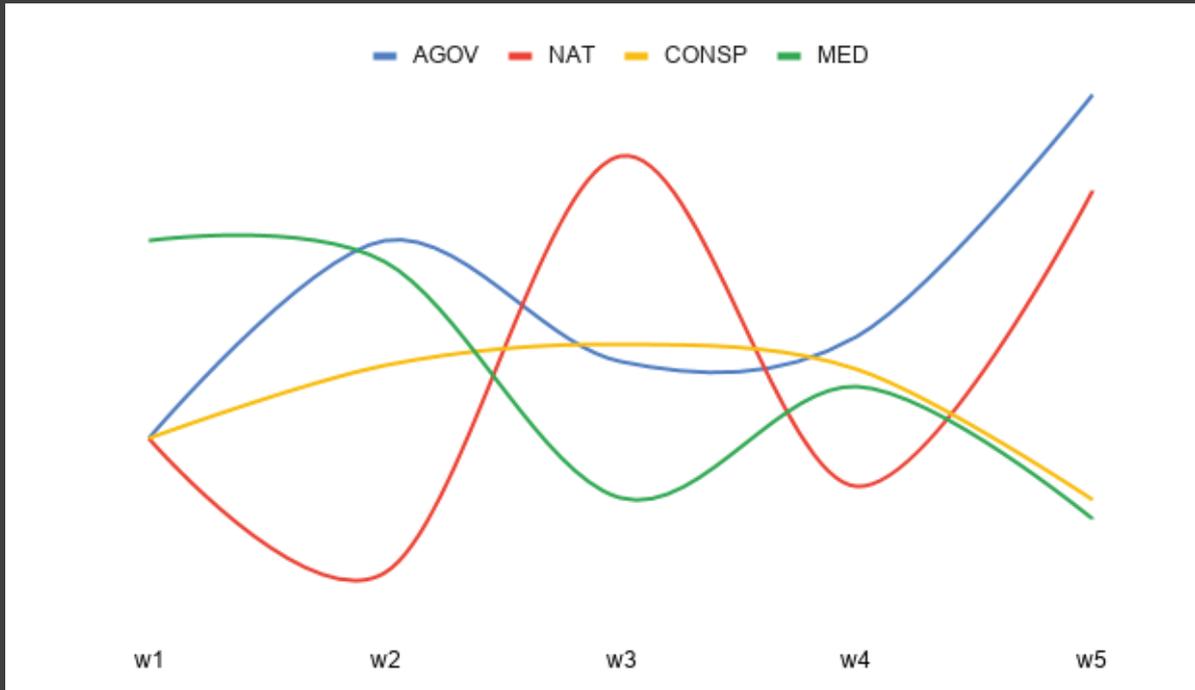
- ▶ **NBAD:** virus is not that bad, govt & media are overreacting. Connected to accusations of corruption / intent to impose dictatorship. Such messages are very visible in Romania, but not as present in Greece, where focus is on more concrete narratives.
- ▶ **FAKE:** pandemic doesn't even exist, but is invented either as part of some global conspiracy or government plan. Also less visible in Greece.
- ▶ **CONSP:** generic, known conspiracies - eg. new world order, big pharma, culling of human population (eg. "Intention to get rid of old people"; "vaccines will contain tracking chips").
- ▶ **NOSCI:** specific science denialism or pushing of bad / misinterpreted science. Eg: claims that temperature scanning or wearing masks have high risk of dangerous side effects. This topic is almost invisible in Greece (has been included in the category "others").
- ▶ **AGOV:** specific anti-government claims, very visible in both countries. Mostly consists of claims of overreporting cases or deaths to cover for acts of corruption or to allow imposing of a dictatorship. In Romania, it includes accusations of censorship, while in Greece censorship is so visible that it makes its own category.
- ▶ **AVAX:** specific anti-vaccination claims. These are somewhat constant, having a "dedicated" movement behind it. This movement has been using the pandemic to push their usual narrative, but have not been able to get too much attention, probably because there is no vaccine against Sars-Cov-2 yet.
- ▶ **NAT:** nationalist messages, anti-globalism, anti EU. Most posts contain attacks on the government, pushing the narrative that the government is unpatriotic, wants to sell out to foreign interest etc. Religious messages are included in this category, especially in Greece, where they are very visible and try to build on differences between the "orthodox greek" and the "muslim refugees".
- ▶ **CENSOR:** claims of censorship are very visible in Greece, either related to the government trying to cover up some actions, or to the world elites trying to suppress the truth.
- ▶ **US/SOR:** Disinformation related to US protests or Soros. This has been growing especially during the height of the protests in US and has usually followed a conservative view. Soros is usually connected to the protests (eg. is funding them), but now and then appears in other narratives (eg. as part of the malefic elites)
- ▶ **MED:** Posts that mention WHO, other health / medical issues or Bill Gates. These have been decreasing in visibility, due to shifting focus.
- ▶ **OTH:** Other topics, including 5G - that lost a lot of attention since april-may.

### All of the topics are analysed in terms of visibility in social media and are connected.

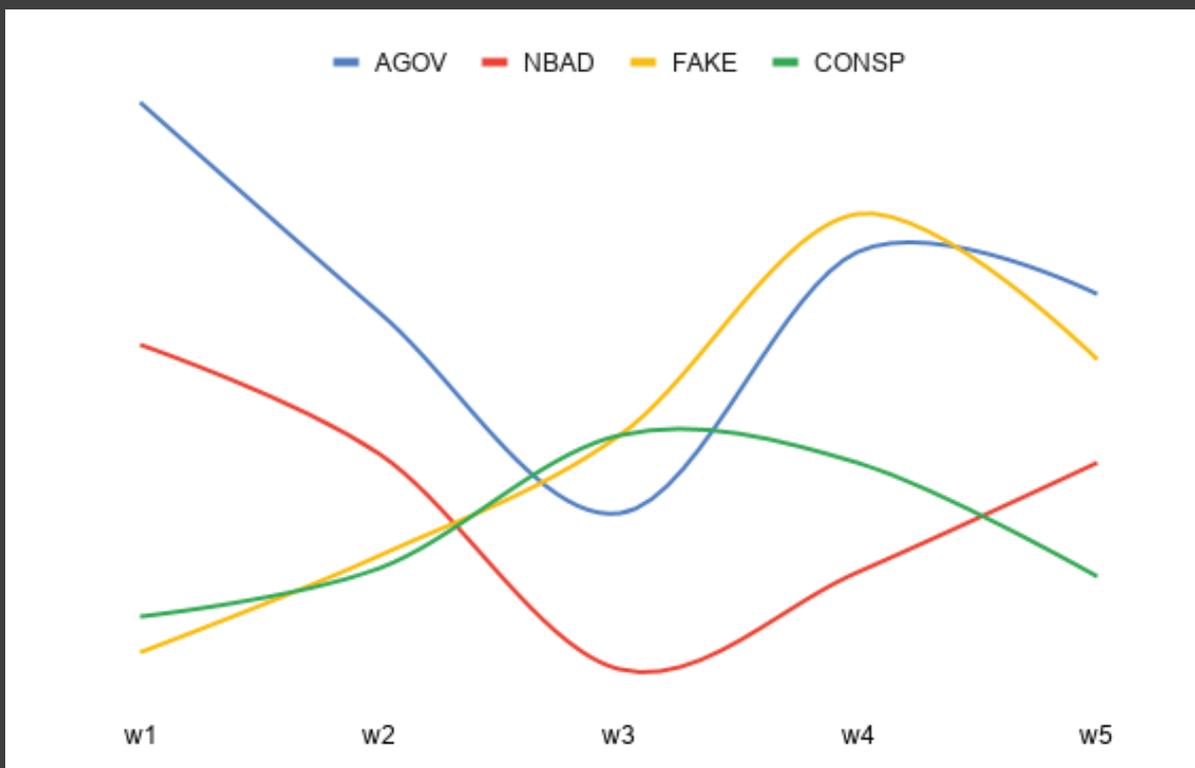
One social media post may "check" on different criteria: for example, one post could claim that the government is overreporting the number of cases so that political leaders can sell more masks, promoting two messages (virus is not that bad, government is corrupt).

Visibility means how likely is it for someone browsing social media in GR / RO to come across messages belonging to some category or another. To calculate this, we took into account both how many posts there are promoting messages in each category, but also considered the engagement of each post (likes, comments and shares).

## Five-week trends (April 1st - May 7th) and observations for the main six disinformation themes



GR



RO

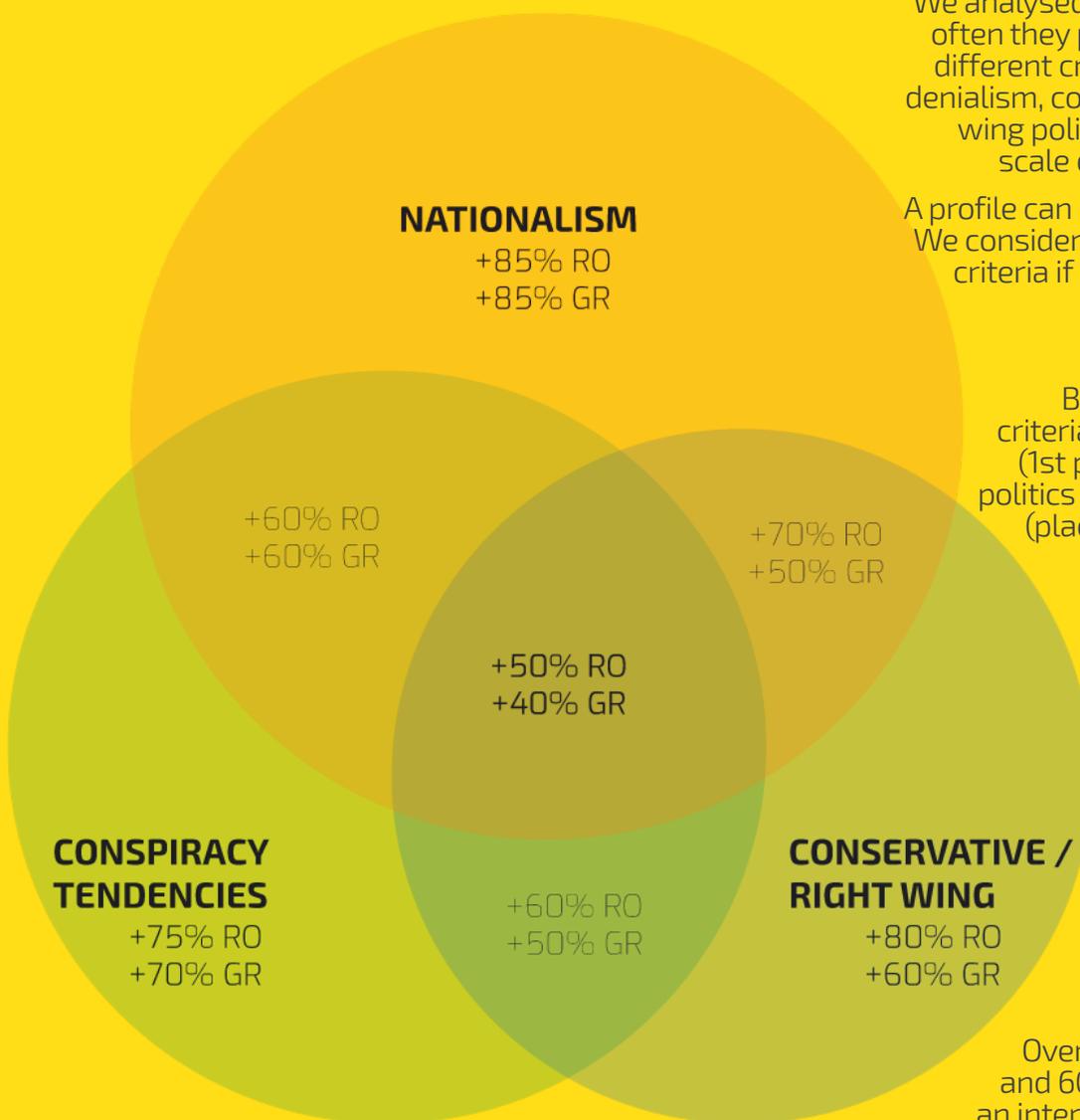
### Observations on trends

- ▶ Trends in the above charts are **relative to each other** - when one theme goes down it does not necessarily decrease in absolute numbers, but is "drowned" in other themes that go up.
- ▶ There is a **cyclic nature** to disinformation topics - they reach some peak, subside and grow back.
- ▶ Greece shows a "struggle" for focus between nationalism and specific anti-government narratives that end up supporting each other (taking attention away from medical related narratives and from general conspiracies).
- ▶ In Romania, the "not that bad" and the anti-government narratives are very similar; also, the COVID conspiracy ("not real") took away attention from generic conspiracies.

# Profiles, pages & groups that spread disinformation in social media in Romania and Greece / May 15th - June 20th 2020

- ▶ Conspiracies about COVID attract more than just fans of conspiracy theories, but the propensity to believe in conspiracies is definitely a factor; we suggest the current crisis acts as a unifier of individual issues or concerns, projected on top of a general distrust in authorities and to some extent in mainstream media.
- ▶ Most accounts belong to real people; some may have duplicate accounts and some accounts seem completely fake, but they are a minority.

- ▶ Antigovernment sentiment is very present, and in some cases may be an underlying cause, but in most cases it is more likely an outcome.
- ▶ Most frequent profile characteristics are nationalism, right wing / conservative politics and the tendency to follow conspiracy theories.
- ▶ For Greece, Nationalism includes anti-refugees and anti-Turkish sentiments.



We analysed the profiles based on how often they push messages that match different criteria (nationalism, science denialism, conspiracies, right wing / left wing politics etc), grading them on a scale of 0 - 10 (10 being the max).

A profile can match one or more criteria. We considered that a profile matched a criteria if it got a mark greater than 5 for that specific criteria.

Both countries had the same criteria in top three - Nationalism (1st place in both), Conservative politics and Conspiracy tendencies (places 2 and 3 were reversed).

Percentages in diagram refer to number of profiles that "had" that characteristic.

Thus, over 85% of profiles are nationalistic in both countries.

75%+ of the Romanian profiles and over 70% of the Greek profiles have a tendency to follow conspiracy theories.

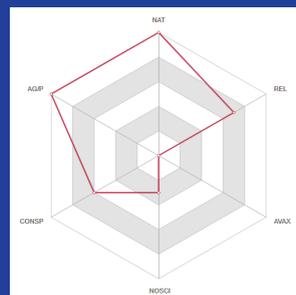
Over 80% of Romanian profiles and 60%+ of Greek profiles have an interest in conservative politics.

## Overlap of main characteristics of profiles that spread disinformation

# Profile **typologies**, for social media disinformation in Romania and Greece

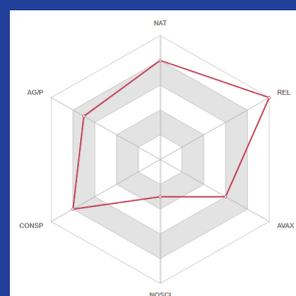
## THE ACTIVIST

The main aim of such profiles is to post content against the current government. usually has strong political views, either extreme left (quite rare), either extreme right / ultraconservative - which is dominating the disinformation space. Most embrace or look up to autocratic leaders around the world, like Putin, Trump or Bolsonaro.



## THE DEFENDER

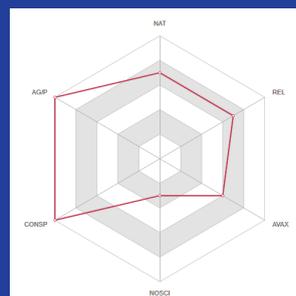
Very traditionalist, motivated by nationalistic and religious values put together. They "romanticize" past victories, mythicize past leaders and call for unity in religion while abhorring most ideas of social progress. While in Romania such profiles "defend" only the morals of the country, in Greece they are more hands-on, with many messages against refugees and against Turkey.



## THE CONSPIRACIST

Profiles that push various conspiracies, from "new world order" to chemtrails or tracking chips in vaccines. Such profiles were already embracing "alternative theories" before the pandemic and have jumped at the occasion to get some new attention.

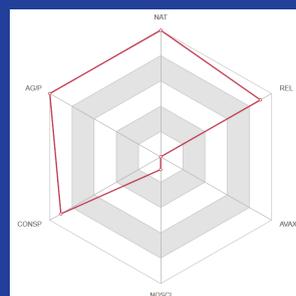
Some profiles in this category are not as excentric, but still share anti-scientific views, for example regarding masks, COVID treatments or temperature scanning.



## THE SOVEREIGNIST

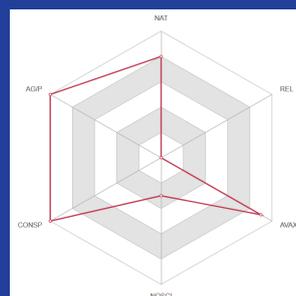
Mixing nationalism and political activism, they reject the idea of integration, are strongly anti-globalist and anti-EU.

Their are usually conservative (left or right leaning) and have been using the pandemic to attack the government for not protecting the country; some pushed the idea that Sars-Cov-2 was created by the "globalists" to undermine China's international power.



## THE Q

A very extreme form of mixing right-wing politics with conspiracy theories. QAnon is a US-based group that has been copied around the world, that pushes radical ideas about world elites running paedophile rings plotting to take complete control. They have constantly postes against health measures, against isolation and claimed COVID is just another hoax.



*All radar charts are representations of actual profiles that fit into those categories, for exemplification purposes. Since all categories are a mixture of previously presented criteria, there can be a wide variety of such representations.*

# CONCLUSIONS:

Disinformation is **still focused on COVID-19**, but underwent interesting changes: if in april - may the trend was to promote a more global and sometimes ineffable conspiracy, in may-june, **narratives became more concrete and localized**. Some international events, such as the protests in the US, have also been used to promote disinformation narratives, by profiles that follow global politics.

Disinformation became **very political** in both Greece and Romania, pushing **nationalist, anti-UE and anti-globalist messages**, tied into fake news about Covid (eg. the government doesn't care about its own people, just keeps unnecessary measures to comply with foreign interests).

**In Greece**, one Facebook group previously called "We don't stay home" changed its name to "Greek resistance", **adapting to the new narratives**. The online discussion has been cetered on **refugees and the Turkey-Greece relations**, but there have also been messages about Germany profiting from the pandemic. Claims of **government corruption** and health professionals being payed to hide "the truth" complete the main picture.

**In Romania**, most messages insist either that **COVID is "just a flu"** - i.e. not as dangerous as claimed by government officials and mainstream media, or that it is **completely made up**. This connects in most cases with **anti-government narratives**: either the government wants to consolidate power and usher in a **"political-medical" dictatorship**, or politicians want to hide **acts of corruption** behind the panic instilled in citizens.

Politically active profiles in Romania **started to connect** around a nationalist, anti-government narrative. Though they claim to be nonpartisan, they share messages from **pages connected to SDP - the main opposition party**, and one rising influencer was "courted" by a media outlet that promotes russian narratives and is connected with a fringe ultranationalist politician known as a fan of various conspiracies.

In both countries, messages that point to **general conspiracies** have remained visible, but mentions of health organizations, Bill Gates, or the connection between COVID and 5G networks are **less present**. However, George Soros has resurfaced, both in connection with the protests in the US (eg. "Soros funding the BLM movement") but also as a general important figure of the "malfeasant elite".

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### OUR TEAM

- ▶ Nikos Panagiotou - Associate Professor/Head Peace Journalism Lab, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (GR), Digital Communication Network Southeast Europe Hub
- ▶ Diana Filimon, Ciprian Cucu - Forum Apulum, Alba Iulia (RO).
- ▶ Alexandru Corpade (RO), Ana David (RO), Ioannis Delimaris (GR), Ioanna Georgia Eskiadi (GR), Efterpi Mouzakiti (GR), Adrian Man (RO), Erasmia Tsipou (GR)

### ORGANIZATIONS

